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The Relationship between Role Theory and Feminism in *Vogue* Advertisements from 1960-1990

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The relationship between role theory and feminism in magazine advertisements, specifically those found in *Vogue* between 1960-1990 was examined. The way gendered roles evolved with cultural changes, spurred by the second and third waves of feminism were observed and documented using role theory as a framework. The purpose of this research was to explore and understand whether women's roles, as presented in *Vogue* advertisements between 1960-1990, were consistent with the expectations of society in terms of gendered norms. We wondered whether women's roles portrayed in *Vogue* advertisements between 1960-1990 might be more consistent with the counter-culture and values of the second and third waves of feminism, so we undertook this research project to better understand the position *Vogue* magazine held during feminism's second and third waves.

Theoretical Framework

Social Role Theory, which posits that "each social situation has specific expectations about 'proper' behavior in that setting," provided the initial framework for our research (McLeod, 2008, p. 1). Additionally, by referencing the second and third waves of feminism, which started in the early 1960s and the early 1990s, respectively, we considered the implications of these waves of feminism toward societal norms. The second wave of feminism, which encompasses the time period of the majority of our research, focused on women leaving the home and entering the workforce in substantial numbers. The shift from housewife to career woman challenged society's role categorization of women, which in the 1960s was heavily gendered – with women expected to be homemakers and caretakers of children. The third wave of feminism differed from the second wave in that it focused on the individual. While it was important that women were able to expand their roles in society, the second wave mainly benefitted privileged white women who could afford childcare. Intersectionality, which focuses on "individual experiences of how systems of privilege and oppression intersect" (Launius & Hassel, 2015, p. 114) was an emphasis of the third wave of feminism. It is recognized that, while gender in itself is a useful category by which to examine societal roles, there are multiple categories of identity such as race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status which are equally important to gaining knowledge of these roles. This analysis is limited to role with respect to gender.

Method

A systematic sampling protocol was developed to gather data. Starting with the September 1960 issue of *Vogue*, the September *Vogue* issued every five years was examined. Using only paid advertisements that depicted a woman's image, every tenth advertisement was captured for analysis. Once the sampling was completed, content analysis was employed. Using a constant comparative method, notes were taken about each advertisement with specific attention given to

the portrayal of the woman and the role the advertisement depicted about her, with an eye for insights about feminism conveyed in the advertisement. These notes began the development of potential categories for our final set of themes. During the course of the content analysis, eight role categories were identified: (1) Role of Woman: Expectations of Appearance, (2) Role of Woman: Defying Expectations of Appearance / Androgyny, (3) Role of Woman: At Home, (4) Role of Woman: Status / Career, (5) Role of Woman: Every Woman / Versatile, (6) Sexualized: Undressed, (7) Sexualized: Dressed, and (8) Intersectionality. We also included an “other” category for themes that did not fit into any of the eight previously listed.

Analysis Results

The “Role of Woman” category was the most prevalent initially, so subcategories were identified as noted above. The “every woman” theme emerged in the mid-1970s, which makes sense considering the emerging counter-culture and second wave of feminism. Further, the “Role of Woman” category observes women who follow expectations of appearance versus women who defy these expectations by playing with gender and androgynous styles. These themes emerged at the end of the 1970s and continued through the 1980s.

Next, we examined how women are sexualized in advertisements by levels of dress and undress. Across all years of our research this was a trend. We found when sexualization occurs with a high level of dress, there is typically an implication of sex and fantasy through the use of a tagline.

Finally, we looked for intersectionality in advertisements. Although we began our research using the 1960 September issue, our research lacked any advertisements featuring models who were people of color, plus-sized, or queer until 1970. Thus, counter-culture did not appear to be a strong message conveyed within *Vogue* magazine as the second wave of feminism took hold.

The second wave of feminism signaled a change in social roles which is reflected through the advertisements found in *Vogue*. In the 1960 and 1965, many advertisements were aimed at career women, who were just entering the workforce for the first time. Moving into the 1970s and especially further into the 1980s, we saw a trend of versatility and intersectionality. This signals a culture of change and advancement which was sparked by the beginning of the third wave feminism.

Ultimately, we were able to observe and document the changes that took place in feminist culture and how those changes were represented through the role of woman. Role theory was supported, as it was clear that five “Role of Woman” categories emerged due to the way roles were communicated in the advertisements. Additionally, the changing societal norms, reflected in roles and related to the second and third waves of feminism, were observed in the *Vogue* advertisements, though *Vogue* did not seem to be on the cutting edge of a counter-culture movement.

References

- McLeod, S.A. (2008) *Social Roles*. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/social-roles.html
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